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## OFFICE OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

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Linda McCulloch  
Superintendent

October 16, 2006

Dear parents and students,

In 2005, the 59th Montana Legislature defined a basic system of free quality public education that included the requirement to assess and track student achievement (20-9-309, MCA). The legislature appropriated funding to the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) to develop and implement a statewide student achievement system that provides timely and accurate information about the performance of Montana's K-12 students and schools. Called AIM (Achievement in Montana), the system will support education information and accountability systems at the local and state level.

To meet this mandate, a unique student identifier number will be assigned to every student who receives educational services from a public school. Each child will be assigned nine randomly generated numbers. Nothing about the number will identify the student or the school. The Student Identifier does, however, allow an individual's data to be distinguishable from that of others over their entire K-12 academic career. This enables local school districts and researchers to analyze achievement based on student characteristics. It also stores the information necessary for allocating state and federal education funds.

A student's record will contain various elements of data, including legal name, gender, birth date, ethnicity, and types of educational services received. AIM will not collect Social Security numbers. We are limiting the data elements that OPI collects from school districts to only those elements that are necessary for state and federal reporting. Montana's system adheres strictly to all Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) statutes.

Most other states have student achievement and accountability systems in place similar to the one that we are developing for Montana K-12 education. We have consulted other state education agencies and benefited from their lessons learned.

AIM will provide accurate information about statewide trends in student achievement without identifying specific students. These "longitudinal" results will enable state policymakers and school leaders to evaluate the success of educational strategies. The system automatically suppresses data if there are fewer than ten students in any category, thus making it impossible to point to an individual student who might otherwise be identifiable by demographics. For instance, if there are just five girls in the third grade in a certain school, the system automatically suppresses results separated by gender.

*"It is the mission of the Office of Public Instruction to improve teaching and learning through communication, collaboration, advocacy, and accountability to those we serve."*

Schools can use trend data to evaluate strengths and weaknesses in the education program. For example, if scores indicate high reading comprehension but low vocabulary, the school might choose to re-evaluate instructional materials and strategies.

Every Montana school district already collects and stores information on each student in accordance with state and federal regulations. In the AIM system, local school personnel will enter each student's primary data just once. If a parent makes a change to their child's data, the district will forward the corrected data to the state. This minimizes paperwork as well as the chances of error.

The streamlined data entry reduces the reporting burden for each district while providing accurate and timely information to educators and parents. This integrated statewide data system will help Montanans transform K-12 education management processes so more time can be spent assisting students and teachers.

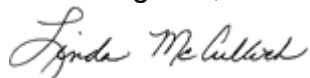
The State of Montana's solid computer infrastructure ensures the security of this massive database. Multiple levels of security and protection include browser-level encryption and password-protected authorization to access any component. OPI policy stipulates that data cannot be taken outside the OPI network.

We encourage parents to ask for your child's state identifier number. Knowing the ID simplifies transferring a student's records when changing schools or reporting a name change.

We believe that the statewide student achievement system can improve the efficiency of education data reporting and reduce the burden on school districts. We are excited about AIM's potential to improve the educational system in Montana. More efficient processes and better information will help educators, parents and policymakers to focus on success for all students. We also know the importance of protecting student data and the rights of students and families. We believe that these goals can be compatible, and we are working hard to ensure that both goals are met.

You can find information about AIM on the OPI website at <http://opi.mt.gov/ITProjects/AIM.html>. If you have additional questions, please call Dave Nagel, AIM Project Manager, at 1-888-231-9393.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Linda McCulloch".

Linda McCulloch  
State Superintendent